

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 08 TEL AVIV 006586

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA, NEA/IPA, NEA/PPD

WHITE HOUSE FOR PRESS OFFICE, SIT ROOM
NSC FOR NEA STAFF

SECDEF WASHDC FOR USDP/ASD-PA/ASD-ISA
HQ USAF FOR XXXX
DA WASHDC FOR SASA
JOINT STAFF WASHDC FOR PA
USCINCENT MACDILL AFB FL FOR POLAD/USIA ADVISOR
COMSOCEUR VAIHINGEN GE FOR PAO/POLAD
COMSIXTHFLT FOR 019

JERUSALEM ALSO FOR ICD
LONDON ALSO FOR HKANONA AND POL
PARIS ALSO FOR POL
ROME FOR MFO

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [IS KMDR MEDIA REACTION REPORT](#)
SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:

Sharon's Political Moves

Key stories in the media:

The political situation following PM Sharon's departure from the Likud and his founding of a new party, and the military situation along the Lebanese border dominate the headlines.

All media reported that 13 to 15 Likud Knesset members (depending on the media), including Ehud Olmert, Meir Sheerit, Tzipi Livni, Abraham Hirschson, and Gideon Ezra, have joined Sharon in the new party, which has been temporary labeled "National Responsibility." Israel Radio reported that the party's permanent name is likely to be "Kadima" (Forward), pending Sharon's approval. All media quoted Sharon as saying at a news conference on Monday afternoon that life in the Likud had become "unbearable." Leading media reported that the Likud's Knesset faction will convene on Thursday to decide whether the Likud ministers will quit the government. The media reported that President Moshe Katsav plans to respect the wishes of the Knesset factions to hold elections on March 28.

The three major newspapers -- Yediot, Maariv, and Ha'aretz -- published results of polls (see below) indicating that, were elections held today, Sharon would "crush" the Likud (Maariv's expression).

Leading media reported that on Monday, Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz and FM Silvan Shalom announced their intentions to compete for Likud chairmanship. Major media reported that former Shin Bet head Avi Dichter is Sharon's candidate for the defense portfolio.

The Jerusalem Post reported that Sharon's decision to leave the Likud has deferred an already long-delayed strategic dialogue with the U.S.

Globes and the business sections of the major newspapers write that Israel's economy, including the adoption of the 2006 state budget, will come to a standstill during the elections period. Erratum: Minister-without-Portfolio Tzachi Hanegbi is the Likud's interim chairman, not as reported on Monday.

All media reported that on Monday, Hizbullah launched a failed attempt to kidnap soldiers in an assault on the Sheba Farms and the village of Ghajar, which straddles the Israeli-Lebanese border, and a coordinated mortar and rocket barrage on northern Galilee towns and kibbutzim. An IDF soldier killed five infiltrators, thus apparently thwarting an attempt to kidnap soldiers. At least 11 soldiers were wounded and a house severely damaged in Metulla by Hizbullah mortar fire. The media reported that the IDF responded with artillery fire and IAF strikes. Israel Radio quoted Mofaz and Deputy Defense Minister Ze'ev Boim as saying that the attack was undoubtedly coordinated with Syria and Iran. The radio reported that Israel views the

Lebanese government as responsible for any hostile activity by Hizbullah against Israel. Israel Radio quoted IDF Chief of Staff Dan Halutz as saying that on Monday, the Lebanese government asked Israel, through international factors, for a cease-fire. The radio quoted Halutz as saying that this was a refreshing novelty, since the Lebanese government understands that it is responsible for actions that are carried out on its territory. Citing Israeli officials, Yediot reported that Israel will file a strong complaint with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and the UN Security Council, and start a "diplomatic campaign" against Iran. Israel Radio reported that Lebanese PM Fuad Siniora is trying to calm the situation and to restrain Hizbullah. However, the radio quoted Lebanese FM Fawzi Salloukh and Hizbullah's leader in southern Lebanon, as saying separately that Israel wanted to create a diversion from its domestic problems. The radio reported that on Monday, State Department Spokesman Sean McCormack condemned Hizbullah's attack. Israel Radio quoted him as saying: "Looking at the calendar, you can, I think, safely assume that this is a deliberate provocation by Hizbullah. I think tomorrow is Lebanon's independence day. And while we certainly recognize Israel's right to self-defense, we urge restraint in taking whatever actions they deem necessary in order to defend themselves so that you do not have an escalation of tensions in the region in the area."

Yediot quoted Labor Party sources as saying that the Construction and Housing Ministry, which is headed by Yitzhak Herzog (Labor), decided, in coordination with Labor Party Chairman Amir Peretz, to market 310 housing units in Ma'aleh Adumim. The newspaper quoted the Labor sources as saying that the move is meant to temper the impression given by the leftist views expressed by Peretz.

The Jerusalem Post reported that the South African Justice Ministry defended itself on Monday and rejected Israeli Justice Ministry claims it had failed to cooperate with an ongoing bribery investigation against Sharon in the so-called "Cyril Kern affair."

Yediot and Hatzofe reported that on the 20th anniversary of his arrest, convicted spy Jonathan Pollard demanded that Israel arrest Angie Kielczynski (a.k.a. Yosef Barak), who admitted in the past he had spied on behalf of the U.S., so that a spy swap between them could be made.

Israel Radio reported that Benjamin Frandsen, a Los Angeles resident, has been convicted of the December 2002 murders of Ben Wertzberger and Adar Ne'eman, two Israeli citizens whose bodies were buried north of Los Angeles. Frandsen's co-defendant, Shane Huang, was previously convicted.

Ha'aretz published the results of a survey conducted on Monday among Likud party members by the Amanet Group's Dialogue Institute:

- "If elections to the Knesset were held today, for which party would you vote?" (In Knesset seats; current Knesset in brackets.) Sharon's party 30; Labor Party 26 (22); Likud 15 (40); Shas 10 (11); Shinui 6 (14); United Torah Judaism 5 (5); Meretz 4 (6); Yisrael Beiteinu 6 (3); National Union 7 (4); National Religious Party 4 (6); Arab parties 7 (8).
- "Unrelated to your vote, who would you like to be prime minister after the elections?" Sharon 37 percent; Peretz 22 percent; the Likud chairman 15 percent.

The results of a Yediot/Mina Zemach (Dahaf Institute) poll show that Sharon's party would get 33 Knesset seats; the Labor Party 26; and the Likud 12.
- The Yediot poll asked: "Did Ariel Sharon act properly when he left the Likud?" Yes: 55 percent; no: 25 percent; 20 percent were undecided.

Maariv printed the results of a TNS/Teleseker Polling Institute survey (data for principal parties):
- "If elections to the Knesset were held today, for which party would you vote?" Sharon's party: 30 Knesset seats; Labor: 26; Likud: 15.
- Maariv's survey reckons that theoretically, Binyamin Netanyahu could count on a 50-MK coalition (Likud, the right, the ultra-Orthodox, Shinui) against a 70-MK opposition. The poll views a possible Sharon-led coalition (comprising his party, Labor, Shinui, and Meretz) as a 71-strong one, with 49 opposition MKs. The survey views a possible 62-MK Peretz-led coalition (comprising Labor, Sharon's party, and Meretz), with 58 opposition MKs.

----- Sharon's Political Moves: -----

Summary: -----

Senior columnist Dan Margalit wrote on page one of popular, pluralist Maariv: "On Monday, Sharon quite rightly celebrated his move on the basis of the opinion polls, which promised him a sweeping victory.... But everybody knows that the Israeli right wing has not yet taken to the streets."

Independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz editorialized: "It appears that it is already possible to assume that there will be an upheaval that will reflect the desires of the [Israeli] public, and that the moderate camp will win most of the votes."

Diplomatic correspondent Herb Keinon wrote on page one of the conservative, independent Jerusalem Post: "The name of the party he heads may change, but Sharon's overall diplomatic vision will stay the same. Until Monday, this was a centrist vision in a right-wing party; as of Monday, it is a centrist vision in a centrist party."

Liberal columnist Gideon Samet wrote in Ha'aretz: "[Sharon] deserves three cheers, on one important condition: that is, of course, that he apply the same tactical understanding to his strategic moves in state affairs."

Block Quotes: -----

I. "Four Months Are an Eternity"

Senior columnist Dan Margalit wrote on page one of popular, pluralist Maariv (November 22): "Admittedly Ariel Sharon's announcement that he was quitting the Likud was routine and tedious.... Nevertheless it was a very powerful statement, because its content was right.... Sharon no longer has any reason to stay in the Likud. There is nothing for him there, and his departure is timely, if somewhat belated. On Monday, he bitterly attacked the political house which he had built, and barely said a word against Amir Peretz. This was not because he does not recognize the threat posed by the Labor Party, but because the cause of his departure lay in the Likud, not the other rival. It will be a life and death struggle. On Monday, Sharon quite rightly celebrated his move on the basis of the opinion polls, which promised him a sweeping victory. According to Monday's arithmetic, he will form the next government and can take down whatever partners he wants from the shelf. But everybody knows that the Israeli right wing has not yet taken to the streets. The orange T-shirts have not yet set their propaganda machine in motion. They are not in anybody's pocket. Whom will they help? The Likud headed by Binyamin Netanyahu? Perhaps. But perhaps they will support the far-right parties. They are the driving force of right wing propaganda.... As of now, Sharon is the leader, Peretz is the surprise and Netanyahu is embarrassed, but four months are an eternity in terms of Israeli politics."

II. "A Disengagement Sequel"

Independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz editorialized (November 22): "The departure of one-third of the Likud's Knesset members is indeed a critical mass; and the reason is not mere coincidence but rather goes to the heart of the matter, that is, the division of the land. This is a sequel-disengagement to the Gush Katif disengagement, which was carried out by none other than the patron of the settlements and became a wake-up call for an entire camp.... The Likud in its present form has come to an end, and all that is left are the trademark and the demagoguery, which are arguably best represented by Binyamin Netanyahu. The trademark that succeeded in sweeping up the masses for 30 years by fanning the flames of hatred for the Left may assume new proportions in the upcoming elections, and this will offer the opportunity for establishing a moderate bloc to its left. Both the Labor Party headed by Amir Peretz and Ariel Sharon's new party will have to wrestle in the election campaign with the deep emotional ties of the Likud voters to their party, and will have to convince them that an automatic vote will not be in their best interests or those of the country. For the first time, there is a chance for a thorough change in voting patterns, for the creation of a real Left and Right, for a realistic examination of the

political balance of power and for the creation of a sane coalition where only the settlers and their supporters will not be represented. The Likud has begun the process of dividing the land, and Sharon has left it in order to continue to do what is needed.... Whatever the balance of power may be between the parties after the elections, it appears that it is already possible to assume that there will be an upheaval that will reflect the desires of the public, and that the moderate camp will win most of the votes."

III. "Sharon Changes the Map Again"

Diplomatic correspondent Herb Keinon wrote on page one of the conservative, independent Jerusalem Post (November 22): "Observers say that centrist parties in this country don't last long, and that a Sharon centrist party would also be lucky to survive more than one term. But this observation misses a critical point. In Israel, where long-term thinking and planning is negligible, and where events follow one another in machine-gun, rat-a-tat fashion, one term is an eternity. And, as Sharon demonstrated through disengagement, much can be done in one term. Sharon, who at 77 can't realistically be thinking of that many more years in office, obviously wants another chance to further shepherd forward the diplomatic process he put into motion and place his imprint indelibly on where this country's final borders will run. This is the process that Sharon has pushed forward for the last two years as Likud's chairman, and the reason, indeed, he got into so much trouble with his own party. It is the same process he will now promote as head of a new centrist party. The name of the party he heads may change, but Sharon's overall diplomatic vision will stay the same. Until Monday, this was a centrist vision in a right-wing party; as of Monday, it is a centrist vision in a centrist party."

IV. "Cheers For Sharon, On One Condition..."

Liberal columnist Gideon Samet wrote in Ha'aretz (November 22): "In his political history, Sharon has traveled a learning curve toward understanding that it is essential to deal with our Palestinian neighbors. But after evacuating Gaza, and the little he did in the West Bank, it would be irresponsible not to seize the raging bull of the Israel-Palestine war by the horns.... Even de Gaulle, with all the differences, reached the conclusion many had spoken about regarding the correct solution for Algeria. His great contribution was that he made a resolute decision when he realized that nobody else could carry it out effectively. Sharon's contribution is similar. Before he could be liquidated from within the Likud, he seized the last opportunity in the existing political format to make use of his power. For this he deserves three cheers, on one important condition: that is, of course, that he apply the same tactical understanding to his strategic moves in state affairs. Very soon -- he does not have much time until March -- Sharon will have to make his line clear.... Gaza was an important signal, but it is not enough. The Roadmap, which Sharon already hailed on Monday as a basis for action, was apparently so before Monday as well. But the declared target date for a Palestinian state has long passed, and less historic decisions are also lying on the road map as dead letters, not only because of the Palestinians. A majority of Israelis support this approach. It registered much before Sharon's big bang, and will probably increase after it. This is a very tempting opportunity, which lies to a large extent in the hands of one man. Sharon must not walk out on it."

JONES